

Psalm 54; Mark 9: 30-37 The Way of Peace

Psalm 54

Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might.
 2 Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.
 3 For the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life;
 they do not set God before them. Selah
 4 But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.
 5 He will repay my enemies for their evil.
 In your faithfulness, put an end to them.
 6 With a freewill-offering I will sacrifice to you;
 I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.
 7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
 and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

This psalm you just heard is a prayer David prayed, before he was a king and while hiding from Saul, the then king of Israel. Even though the young David was the only one who could comfort the king with his music in his moments of distress, once Saul got into his head that David was a threat to his kingship, Saul decided to eliminate him. So, David went in hiding and prayed to God to save him from the enemies that were seeking his life.

We see in this tragic backstory of Saul and David, and elsewhere in the Scripture, how those who seek power, or those who have power and are intent on keeping it, do so by attacking to eliminate the perceived threats. The Pharaoh of Egypt did that when the Hebrews in Egypt became numerous and posed a threat to Egyptian rulers, by ordering all Hebrew male babies to be killed at birth. Centuries later, King Herod made a similar move when he heard the wise men from the East came looking for a newborn king, ordering all male babies under the age of 2 to be killed.

And beyond the world of the Bible, this strategy of eliminating altogether or subjugating the threats to oppression and persecution, asserting dominance, have been a very popular method of gaining, keeping, and exercising power in the world. In preparation to my visit to Japan this summer, I did some research into the Japanese Samurai culture. If you can call watching a quasi-historical documentary movie on Netflix research. The Samurai class was a product of the Age of Warring States in pre-modern Japan, existed to serve their war lords against the other war lords. I suspect we can find this Way of War that seeks dominance by force and violence in all cultures throughout the history, all the way down to our own time.

And the tricky thing is, this Way of War, does not always manifest itself as actual war or conflict between the ancient empires or the Superpowers in the modern world. It can sneak into

our communities, and into our hearts, simply as a way of the world and find its home there. Not even Jesus' disciples were immune to it. Listen now to Jesus' interaction with his disciples, in the Gospel according to Mark 9: 30-37.

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

So far, the disciples and the crowd have seen Jesus's ministry as one of authority and power; Jesus always won and came out on top victorious, over the demonic forces and argumentative religious leaders. Having witnessed Jesus' healing power, the crowd wanted to make him a king, and the disciples, represented by Peter, declared Jesus the Messiah they'd been waiting for. What they hadn't caught on was that the religious leaders were starting to see Jesus as a threat to their authority. They hadn't realized, the ancient way of the world was encroaching upon Jesus. War was about to be declared on him.

So, for the second time, Jesus told them exactly what will happen; he will be betrayed into the human hands, who will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. The first time, as we heard last week, Peter jumped in and told Jesus off, practically saying "don't be ridiculous." This time, the disciples still didn't understand but were too afraid to ask Jesus what he meant exactly, so they kept silent.

They wanted to believe in Jesus holding the kind of power and authority in the world that they knew; what other kind of power is there? What other kind of Messiah could he be? The kind of power that can get him killed and then get him to rise from death didn't make sense to them. Nobody had heard such thing. Perhaps they were afraid to come to understand that Jesus wasn't the Messiah they envisioned him to be... the glorious future king of Israel greater than any other kings.

Greater... That's what their minds were focused on, even as they were walking their way, following Jesus, back to Capernaum, their home base. For Jesus had taken them away to reveal deeper truth about him, the truth the crowds and the world did not yet know. When they got back home, Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the way. The disciples fell silent again. This time, because they were arguing with one another who was greater or the greatest, and somehow, deep down in their hearts, they knew that was setting their minds not on divine things but on human things, which was exactly the reason Jesus had scolded Peter earlier.

Here we see the disciples really struggling to discern what Jesus was calling them to do and be; what it meant for them to set their minds on divine things, while they were living knee deep in the way of the world that would have them set their minds on human things. It's hard. It's confusing. It's tricky.

They were arguing with one another who was the greatest. They weren't having a nice conversation about how each of them wanted to be the best version of themselves God created them to be. No, they didn't want to be just "great" but greater and better than others.

It's a concern born of a mindset propelled by comparison, which gives rise to competition, which in turn fosters a desire to dominate others, to come out on top... it's a path that leads to conflict. It is the seed of the ancient Way of War that still holds sway in our world, and in our hearts.

Fr. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar and a spiritual leader based in Albuquerque says, "the Pax Romana (the peace of the Roman Empire) creates a false peace by sacrificing others; the Pax Christi (the peace of Christ) waits and works for true peace by sacrificing the false self of power, prestige, and possessions." Put it another way, the way of the world would have you sacrifice (or use) others to gain life that the world sees as successful, while the way of peace of Christ calls us to sacrifice one's hold on the life the world gives to gain life that God gives.

Though the disciples kept silent, Jesus knew what they had been up to, so he taught them "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." To show them what he meant, he takes a little child and have the child stand in their midst, and holding the child in his arms, said to them "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes God."

Now, I am sure this little child was cute. We associate little children with sweet innocence and meekness, and we adore them, but Jesus may have had something more specific

in mind when he placed the little child in front of them. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, including the Jewish world, children did not stand for sweet innocence but for the lowliness of their place in the society. They were without status and had no power to give them position; they were the most subservient ones in the society, the ones who had to do what one was told. The Greek word for “little child” shares the root with the word for “servant.” They were the lowest in the social structure of the time, as someone to assist in serving meals. They were socially invisible. The little child stood for those who don’t count nor valued in the society.

Jesus placed the child in their midst, making it visible, and gave it a standing, a coveted place, in fact, for Jesus first welcomed the little child by holding it in his arms and completely identified with it, saying if you welcome the child, you welcomed him, and in turn, God who sent him.

If you want to be great in God’s eye, serve those who are the weakest and who have no apparent value or worth or usefulness in the way of the world. No one is sacrificed, but everyone is concerned for one another. That is the way of peace. It’s not just a reversal of the ranking order, the first shall be last and the last shall be first, but with that reversal comes a radical shift in the way we treat one another. No more conflict driven by our own security to come out on top, to be the winner. What if we lose our life in the process or as a consequence of serving others in the name of Jesus, well that’s why Jesus has been telling the disciples, even then, don’t worry, God will raise those who took their cross and followed Jesus till the end.

In the society where the “greatest” is the most powerful having “survived” competition, at the cost of all others, all suffers for the one who is ultimately fighting for oneself. But in Jesus’ world of welcoming and embracing the least, the way is paved with mutual service and sacrifice, where we uphold one another, because, at any time any one of us can be that powerless child.

The disciples struggled to figure out what Jesus’ teaching meant for them. It was hard and confusing, and it is for us. Think of what it means for our world today, think, for instance, as we as a country move into the season of discernment. When we think of our collective life as a nation, and if we say we want to “Make America Great Again,” what kind of “great” nation are we trying to be? What kind of global neighbor would America the great nation be? Are we concerned with being “greater” and the “greatest,” or are we concerned with serving our Prince of Peace.

Our collective, public life as a nation is one level this Scripture compels us to reflect on. But as the disciples showed us, the way of the world makes its way into our hearts, into the very heart of our personal lives, into the way we judge ourselves and our closest relationships. This is not a reflection on any of my past or present life partners, but I was always of suspicious, even skeptical of getting in a relationship with someone who was “great” by the measure of the world; someone who was successful in terms of prestige and possession. For, the worldly fortune can turn in a way that’s completely out of our control, and I wondered what would happen to this “successful” person when all that makes him “successful” was taken away from him.

I married a wonderful person who was not in a money-making industry nor had a career that had a “lot of future,” but he was a great artist and to me looked like a Greek god; we never had a lot of money, but we were happy. When the brain cancer struck him, he lost his ability to paint, to run, or to ride the bike he loved, well just about everything. Towards the end of his cancer treatment, he had lost even that great look he had. When his ability that made him great was gone, when his physical beauty was gone, then I knew I was in love with his soul. And God is in love with us like that.

That little child, with no gifts to offer to the world, serve no apparently useful service, of no apparent value, is each one of us and Jesus welcomes and accepts and loves. God is with that little child. Now, God calls us to love that little child in others, and in ourselves.

Thanks be to God.